The propaganda unit behind Labour’s extremism report

Ricu was set up by a former MI6 officer to give ‘consistently clear and appropriate communications’ but it appears anything but transparent

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The Government's Research, Information and Communications Unit was set up with the aim of providing "consistently clear and appropriate communications".

But despite its name, Ricu, as it is known, appears anything but transparent, with little of its work made available to the public or politicians.

Set up in 2007 by Sir Charles Farr, a former MI6 officer, with the aim to "understand and counter terrorist and extremist ideologies", the unit initially "comprised representatives from the Home Office, Department for Communities and Local Government and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, reporting to ministers across all three departments".

The department now sits under the Home Office and is one strand of the Government's counter-extremism strategy, known as Prevent. As of March 2023, it had 22 allocated staff.

On Monday, it was revealed that a leaked Home Office report had recommended that police should record more non-crime hate incidents. Ricu was one of its authors, writing an analysis of the policy along with the Home Office Prevent section, and Homeland Security Analysis and Insight.

The review – called a "rapid sprint" – was ordered by Yvette Cooper, the Home Secretary, in August last year as part of work to develop a new counter-extremism strategy and was leaked to Policy Exchange, the think tank.

While there is minimal information in the public domain about Ricu, its influence on the UK has been clear.

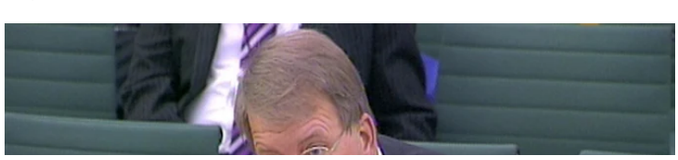
'Covertly engineer thoughts of people'

The unit has spent years "attempt[ing] to covertly engineer the thoughts of people" by providing support to bodies seen as "grassroots" organisations, Laura Dodsworth, author of A State of Fear, told The Telegraph in 2021 amid concern over the government's use of behavioural psychology on the public during Covid.

But the unit had seemingly been using methods like this long before the pandemic. In its first major intervention shortly after its inception in 2007, the unit recommended dropping the phrase "war on terror" as it was judged to be "prone to misinterpretation and has generally been avoided in this country".

In 2009, Sir Charles told a Home Affairs Commons committee discussing the government's counter-terror strategy that Ricu had been focused on "how you communicate the threat in and through Muslim communities in this country, what language is appropriate and is true to the threat we face but resonates with the communities we need to work with".

"So, very simply, we do not tend, as we know, to talk about war on terror; we do not intend to talk about Islamic terrorism, not because in certain circumstances that is an inaccurate description but because the language admits of a number of interpretations which are not always helpful to us," he said.



Ricu was established in 2007 by Sir Charles Farr, a former MI6 officer Credit: PA

Ricu, he said, "operated to try to convey to, for example, local authorities, the chief constable, proposals about issues of that kind: how to catch the threat in a way that actually is faithful to the threat we face but, equally, does not alienate the communities we need to work with".

He added: "I do not want to give the impression that Ricu's sole purpose is to communicate with Muslim communities in this country. It is not. I think probably it made sense for us to start there because that was the most difficult communications task. Generally speaking, outside Muslim communities communicating about the threat and about our response to it is a bit easier."

But by 2011, the Home Office was forced to admit that Ricu's impact had been "variable", declaring the need to "identify credible partners" and develop "more professional counter-narrative products" in the Prevent report.

In 2016, the Guardian reported that Ricu had been using "propaganda methods", with covert operations aiming to "effect behavioural and attitudinal change" in the British public.

Ricu was said to be using YouTube, Twitter and Facebook to counter Islamic State propaganda, while outsourcing covert work to an agency whose objective was reportedly to "influence online conversations by being embedded within target communities via a network of moderate organisations that are supportive of it's [sic] goals".

Shawcross review

In 2023, Sir William Shawcross, the commissioner for public appointments, published a review of the whole Prevent scheme, which did little to allay concerns over Ricu's treatment of Islamist threats.

He found the unit to be of particular concern, identifying an "inconsistency" when it came to the way it viewed "Islamism ideology" and "the extreme Right".

He wrote: "The bar for what Ricu includes on Islamism looks to be relatively high, whereas the bar for what is included on Extreme Right-Wing is comparably low."

Though Ricu had been producing "products related to Islamist terrorism", he argued that "much of the material covering Extreme Right-Wing falls well below the threshold for even non-violent extremism".

Sir William described a 2020 Ricu analysis document on "Right-Wing terrorist and extremist activity online" which said that books by "mainstream British conservative commentators" were "key cultural nationalist ideological texts".

The same document had also contained a list of "historic works of Western philosophic and literary canon".

Training for staff in the unit had included an essay by the charity Hope Not Hate, which cited the work of Rod Liddle,

Melanie Philips and Douglas Murray as contributing to "negative views about Islam and Muslims via the pages of mainstream publications".

"Maybe one reason the traditional far Right is so small right now is because it is simply not needed," the analysis suggested.

'Far-Right sympathetic audiences'

Sir William's report also cited another document from 2019, which discussed a cohort of social media users labelled "Actively Patriotic and Proud" and listed a prominent Conservative politician and former member of the government as being among figures "associated with far-Right sympathetic audiences, and Brexit".

Though he did not name the politician at the time, the Mail on Sunday subsequently revealed that it was Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg, who condemned Ricu as "wasting effort on elected politicians scandalously diverted resources from evil-doers".

Sir William concluded that the inconsistency in approach to the ideology of the "extreme Right" and Islamism "risks creating false equivalence in the minds of Prevent practitioners about the scale and nature of the threats" from both.

In the wake of the Shawcross review, Suella Braverman, the then home secretary, warned that Ricu had "failed" in its inability to draw distinctions between "mainstream Conservative commentary" and the "extreme Right".

"People such as my right Hon Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) and Douglas Murray express mainstream, insightful and perfectly decent political views," she said.

"People may disagree with them, but in no way are they extremists, and Prevent must not risk any perception of disparaging them as such again."

'Wasting resources'

Ms Braverman reiterated her concerns to The Telegraph on Monday night, saying it needed to shift its focus towards, not away, from Islamist extremism.

"As home secretary I voiced concerns about how Ricu was targeting the wrong people and wasting resources on things that posed no threat," she said.

"Fundamentally, it needs reform so that its main and predominant focus is Islamist extremism, which makes up the vast bulk of MI5's caseload."

On Tuesday, Dan Jarvis, the Home Office minister, told MPs in the House of Commons: "Islamist extremism, followed by far-Right extremism, are the biggest threats that we face.

"The Home Secretary set out last week our plans to carry out an end-to-end review of Prevent thresholds on Islamist extremism because we are concerned that referrals are too low and ideology, particularly Islamist extremism, followed by far-Right extremism, continue to be at the heart of our approach to countering extremism and countering terrorism."